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Jobs In Sheet Metal Work

What does a sheet metal worker do that makes the trade so important? Bernard Friedland, of the trade's largest union, has no trouble answering such a question.

There's no end to the ways sheet metal is used! That means there's no end to the kinds of jobs sheet metal workers may be asked to do.

Friedland is stationed in New York City, one of the busy centers for sheet metal work. The trade is involved in most construction jobs. Sheet metal workers shape metal ducts for air conditioning, heating, and ventilation systems. They cut flat metal for walls and counters. They stamp metal to be used on roofs and in siding. They bend metal to fit the spaces in which it is to be used.

Most of the preparation of sheet metal is done in large shops. Workers using blueprints measure, cut, bend, shape, and fasten pieces of sheet metal so that they can be put into place where needed. This means they must know how to handle hand and machine shears, hand saws, power saws, and heavy steel presses.

They also finish the shaping of the metal by joining seams. This can mean bolting, cementing, riveting, soldering, or welding. Sheet metal workers need many skills. They must also be ready to switch from one job to another many times during each working day.

Sheet metal work is very exact. Part of it is done at the shop. The rest is done at the construction site.

The metal sheets used on a roof can be measured and cut just before they are put into place. One panel is placed, and the edge of the next one is fastened to it. This is repeated until the roof is covered. Then machine-made moldings are put along the joints and at the corners. The panels lock into one another at their edges. When sealing material is placed over the panels, the roof is safe from water leakage.

Before Friedland became a union official, he headed a team that installed signs. "It's not hard to understand why sheet-metal workers stay with one kind of job," he says.

Years of Training

There is so much to learn that it's best to become an apprentice. The union and an employer work together

during the five years it takes to finish the training. You work on a job during the day and attend classes at night.

There are more jobs and larger apprenticeship programs in those parts of the country that have the most construction work. The 1980's should see many new openings. Thousands of those in the trade are reaching retirement age. That's why it's important to find out what you should know to be accepted for training.

You have the best chance if you have finished Vo-Tech school. A vocational course with many shop classes is valuable. Since much of the work begins with blueprints, you should know something about mechanical drawing. You also need mathematics through geometry. In other words, don't try to enter this trade unless you've worked hard and done well in Vo-Tech.

Once you become a journeyman, you really don't know what part of the trade will take up your working years. Many industries need sheet metal workers. You may make more in the construction trades, but there's no promise that you will get your first job there. And since workers become very skilled in the kind of sheet metal work they first do, most remain in that same field.



On Your Feet

Part of your work may be in a shop. Sheet metal must be fabricated, or prepared for the needs of a job. Then it must be installed. You are on your feet most of the time. You often work in high places. The work can be dangerous.

It Takes Time

It takes about ten years to gain all the skills you need. You do this only when you work at the same kind of job for months at a time. If you change later to another kind of sheet metal work, then you again need the training that comes with doing something a little new.

This is a hand trade. The use of machines may help, but in the end it's the touch of the trained worker that makes a job come out as it should. There are some new materials being used - plastics, new alloys, and coated metals. However, these too require the attention of skilled workers.

If the building trades remain as active as they were in 1980, then there will be many job openings. It seems possible that sheet metal workers will remain busy through the 1990's.

Get Your Training At Lackawanna Vo-Tech

Shown on the and the following three pages are some Vo-Tech materials that John gave me, on Friday, I believe. He showed me some of these several weeks ago and requested copies of same and was glad to get them. No one on sheet metal was on my desk earlier today and R&T asked me if I were considering a career in sheet metal. "Not during this decade," said I, and we both laughed. At about 750 AM or so this morning I was about my business -- coffee at Turkey Hill and walking up Main Street when John came down the street on his Suzuki. What a surprise. We exchanged a very friendly "bonjour" and went